

Ever have the feeling you're being watched?

'Tense and
dark and twisty –
don't look away'
MICHAEL
ROBOTHAM

THE LAST GUESTS

J.P. POMARE

WINNER OF THE NGAIO MARSH AWARD

**THE
LAST
GUESTS
J. P. POMARE**

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For my daughter, Blake

That's a secret, private world you're looking into out there.
People do a lot of things in private they couldn't possibly
explain in public.

– **REAR WINDOW**

PROLOGUE

HE IS ANYBODY, everybody, nobody. A black jacket, blue jeans, baseball cap and black sneakers. That's what the neighbours would see if they happened to glance out the window as he passed through the front gate and crossed the three metres of cobbled path to the front of the house. His heart is steady, his hand is still as he punches the code into the silver key safe bolted to the brick facade of 299 Hillview Terrace. Four-one-three-nine, then it falls open and he's staring at a simple silver key and a long brass mortise key attached to a key ring in the shape of New Zealand.

He pockets the keys, pulls his hat lower and walks back to the rental car parked on the street. He opens the boot, retrieves two large suitcases and wheels them to the house. He scans the entrance. *No cameras, no surveillance.*

He slides the keys into the locks, first the antiquated bottom lock with the long brass key then the modern lock. The door swings back, an arm opening to invite him inside. He drags the suitcases over the threshold and closes the door behind him. Open plan, as sterile and neat as a hotel room. Polished floorboards echo beneath his sneakers as he passes through the kitchen to the lounge room. Framed Ikea prints. A boxy couch that looks like it

belongs in a furniture showroom. A beige rug. Outside, through the sliding door, a tiled courtyard and a potted lemon tree sit in the lukewarm sunlight.

He checks out the other rooms. There's a study just large enough for a pine desk, a chair and a bookshelf. The bedroom is generous: a king-sized bed, a flat screen TV bolted to the wall and a wardrobe. He knows the place is booked this weekend and most nights next week. It averages seven bookings a month, which isn't surprising. It's cheap and not too far from the CBD. Most importantly, it's available for single-night bookings. Ideal for a one-night stand. Perfect for his needs.

He sets both suitcases down in the living room and opens them to reveal a handheld vacuum cleaner, a number of white cardboard boxes, a cordless drill, screws, screwdrivers, chisels, a paint roller. He also has a plaster kit.

His eyes roam the walls and the ceiling, his gaze coming to rest on the black pendant light fitting hanging down. Lights are good; people tend not to stare directly at them. He takes one of the four chairs ringing the dining table and places it at the centre of the room before climbing up to examine the elaborate bowl-shaped design of the lampshade. He lowers himself back to the carpet again and pulls a bluetooth speaker from one of the suitcases. He puts on music, 'Paint It, Black' by the Rolling Stones. With the volume up high, he climbs onto the chair again and begins drilling a tiny aperture. It's an expensive drill, much quieter than the splash of the cymbals coming from the speakers, the rolling thud of the bass drum. He hums the tune.

Back down from the chair, he opens the white boxes, looking for the size he is after. *Bingo*. A three-millimetre fish-eye lens. He removes the camera, about the size of a pen nib. He climbs back up, presses it through the hole in the light fitting and fastens it in place. He returns to the floor and inspects his handiwork. Unless

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you knew exactly what you were looking for, you would never notice it.

Next he goes to the bedroom, eyes searching. There's a smoke alarm. He could punch out the tiny light that only flashes when the battery is low and put the camera eye in its place. He brings the chair in from the lounge room, climbs up. As he reaches for the alarm, he hears something over the music and freezes. It's a rattling sound coming from outside. Could it be someone dragging their bin out? He doesn't move until the sound is gone. Then, exhaling, he completes the installation. The alarm won't work anymore – he takes the battery out just to be sure.

Now the bathroom. He stops at the door and considers the layout, his gloved hands gently sliding across the wall tiles. He has to have a camera in here, but there is no obvious place to conceal it. If he puts one in the ceiling beside the fan, the steam will likely obscure the vision. And he needs to find somewhere that will capture both the shower and the rest of the room. Or use two cameras. He takes option B, better to be safe than sorry. He runs hot water in the shower with the fan turned on, watches where the steam comes to rest on the surfaces. The glass of the shower screen, the mirror, the steel handrail next to the toilet. Anywhere lower than waist height is good, any higher and you risk fogging the lens. The towel rail is attached to the wall with a small screw. That'll do. He carefully removes the screw from the rail and replaces it with an expensive camera mounted in a screw head. Then he places the second camera in the light fitting above the mirror, just below the fan where there's no steam on the tiles.

Back out in the hallway, the walls are thin plasterboard. Tapping with his knuckles he finds the stud near the meter box and cuts out a square beside it with a jab saw; the hole is just large enough for his remote-access 5G wi-fi router which is already configured with the cameras. He can't stream through the house's wi-fi in case

the hosts change the password or have enough technical nous to check how many devices are currently connected to the network and realise there are four extras unaccounted for – the four cameras. Some savvy travellers also have apps and devices which check to see if any cameras are running through local wi-fi networks.

He installs a power point within the wall and plugs the router in. He finds the switchboard just inside the front door and opens it to reveal a panel of new circuit-breakers. He runs the cable from the router through the same switch as the hot water service. Kill the hot water and the cameras will drop out. It's not ideal, but it's least likely to be switched off and a new circuit-breaker might get noticed.

Then he takes a piece of plaster from his kit and cuts it to shape, fitting it into the square to hide the router. He's a perfectionist. It's a flaw as much as an asset; he can't leave a job until everything is polished, finished. What calms him most is sanding down a jag in a wooden bench or buffing out a scuff in floorboards. The sort of work that soothes him but doesn't pay well. This job has made him the most money; and while this work may not be calming, it is, oddly, the most satisfying. There is enough risk to keep it interesting, but when you're this careful and precise there's almost no chance of getting caught.

Now he mixes a little plaster and smears it over the seams. While it dries, he goes to the kitchen, fires up his tablet and logs on to the surveillance software.

The screen shows a man in a cap hunched over a faux stone benchtop, with boxes open on the carpet of the adjoining lounge room. He clicks through each camera: the bathroom, a view of the shower and then a view of the toilet, then the bedroom.

'Shit,' he says to himself. 'You idiot.'

The bedroom camera catches only two-thirds of the bed. He can see everything except the pillows. He grinds the heels of his palms

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into his temples. The bed yields the most sought-after footage – that’s why he is here. He strides back into the bedroom, searching for a better spot. He could shift the smoke detector, sand and paint where it was, rewire it to the new spot. But a cleaner might notice if it has moved; a nosy cleaner might even take a closer look. That’s the easiest way to lose his equipment and possibly get caught. *I could turn the fitting, so the camera is aimed closer to the bed*, he decides.

He climbs up to start turning the alarm fitting. As he examines it, though, he sees that the smoke alarm has a smear of paint on one side, from the last time the room was painted, he guesses. It’s dusty, too, clearly a few years old, and his gloved fingers have left tiny smudges. He chews his lip, his frustration growing. Should he put a second camera in this room? But where? *How many viewers will I lose if I don’t have the pillows in the frame?* He thinks for a moment. *Full HD streams with night vision*, he tells himself, *it doesn’t matter if you miss the pillows, the viewers will still flood the streams*. He wipes the dust on his shirt away and climbs down.

Back in the lounge room, he takes a coin-sized chip of paint from the removed square of plaster and puts it in his pocket. Then he cranes his head out the door before striding to the car. A modern white Toyota, the most forgettable car on the roads. He removes his hat and gloves, starts the car and heads up the street. He goes the long way around the park at the top of the street, taking the same route he came earlier to avoid the CCTV at the corner store. He drives north, over the harbour bridge and west to a part of the city where no one would ever recognise him.

The sign above the door reads, ‘Speedy Shoe Repairs and Key Cutting’. A man is grinding a key when he enters, so he waits with his head down, pretending to study a display of key rings near the counter. The grinder stops, the portly man blows away the steel files, rubs the key on his blue apron as he walks towards the counter. ‘How can I help you?’

‘I just need another copy of these.’ He holds out the keys.
‘These are the wife’s.’

‘Lost yours, eh?’

He answers quickly, the first thing that comes to mind. ‘Mine are at the bottom of the Pacific.’

‘Right,’ the man says with a smile. ‘Fisherman.’

‘You bet.’

The man takes the long mortise key now, peers closely at it.
‘Don’t see these too much these days.’

‘It’s an old unit. Still got the original lock as well as a deadbolt.’

‘You in a rush?’

‘I am actually.’

‘It’ll probably be half an hour.’

‘That’s fine.’

‘Five bucks for one copy of this one and twenty-nine for this one.’

He smiles. ‘Sure.’

‘I’ll grab a number to call you when they’re done.’

‘I’ll just come back in half an hour.’

The man’s eyes linger on him for a moment. *Suspicion?* Maybe. He’s sizing him up. ‘Right.’

He returns to the car, sits in the driver’s seat, brings up the camera streams on his phone. With the curtains closed, the bedroom is dark, so he turns on night mode. The screen goes from black to a shade of green, like the bottom of the sea. The shape of the bed is sharp, the pattern on the carpet is clear – it’s good. Much better than he was expecting.

The keys are ready and waiting for him when he returns. There’s a tiny orange buoy attached to the key ring.

‘Now they’ll float,’ the man says with a wink.

‘Thanks,’ he says, annoyed that he is making himself more memorable. Easy to imagine this chipper bloke in a dim police

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interview room. *Yeah, the fisherman. I remember him clearly.* Maybe he should have done one key at one locksmith and the other at a different one. Maybe he should have kept his mouth shut. In the future, he'll be more careful.

He pays cash, pockets the keys and heads back to the car. He drives to another shopping strip, with a hardware store. He finds an uninterested teenager leaning on his elbow over the paint desk.

'Hi, just need something that matches this.' He lays the paint chip on the counter.

'Sure, how much?'

'Enough for ten metres.'

It takes five minutes to mix. When it's done, the youth paints a spot, blow dries it and compares the dry paint to the chip. It looks perfect.

'Great,' he says, taking the can.

The youth picks up the chip.

'I need that,' he says quickly.

'Sorry?' The teenager looks at him.

'The chip, give it to me.'

'Okay, sorry, I didn't . . .'

He takes the chip from the teenager's hand and turns, striding towards the checkout.

Back at the house, wearing his gloves and hat once more, he tests the new keys and finds they both slide in and turn smoothly. The door unlocks. He can return whenever he wants. Some months from now, when the place isn't booked, he can slip in and uninstall the cameras.

His repairs have dried while he has been out. In the kitchen, he lays out a sheet of newspaper before returning to the hallway to study the wall for a moment, noting the original paintwork, the telling strokes. It was clearly a roller job, using decent paint that has been there for a while. His tin is enough to do the entire wall

if he needs to. He has drop sheets with him. The fine sandpaper rasps as he smooths the edges of the new plaster. Then he cleans it with an alcohol wipe, fills the paint tray and begins rolling it on, covering only the new square of wall and ten centimetres around it.

While it dries, he repacks all but a few of the white boxes into his suitcases. Again, he finds the street empty when he opens the door. He quickly drags the suitcases back out to the rental, stowing them in the boot.

He packs up the last of his things, pulls a chair out from the table, half-closes the curtains, tips a third of the complimentary carton of milk down the sink. He sprays air freshener, hoping to neutralise the paint smell. He walks to the bedroom, pulls a small ziplock bag from his pocket and opens it to pluck out one of the long blonde hairs inside. He lays it on a pillow. He'd collected them from the drain at a swimming pool across town.

He pulls the blankets back on the bed and rumples the sheets. He empties the remaining five hairs from the ziplock bag into the shower, then he runs the hot water for a moment. He mops up a little of the water with one of the towels then leaves it on the floor. He does one last walk-through, searching for any sign of his presence, but everything is in place.

Under the glow of a streetlight, he locks the keys away, as per the instructions on the listing, and gets into the rental car. Now he waits.